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NGOs, the Environment and Political Pluralism in New Order Indonesia

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Last September, Indonesian President Suharto addressed his country's state-controlled media to publicly apologize for the massive forest fires that were wreaking havoc with the atmosphere of other countries in the region. At the time, "haze" from dozens of fires blazing out of control on several of Indonesia's islands was drifting into neighboring Malaysia and Singapore, causing dangerously high levels of air pollution and contributing to a variety of fatal accidents throughout Southeast Asia.

Suharto blamed drought conditions brought about by that year's El Niño current for causing the fires, and vowed that his government was stepping up efforts to put an end to the blazes. He could have left it at that. In the next breath, however, the man who has ruled Indonesia with an iron fist for over thirty years added democracy and human rights into the equation.

"We truly understand that...protecting the environment, developing democracy and upholding human rights...are indeed important conditions for the growth and development of the nation," Suharto declared. "Failure to handle the issues can become a source of disaster for our offspring in the future." [1]

Why, many outside observers ask, would an authoritarian like Suharto even mention democracy or human rights -- issues that have been anathema to his rule from its very beginning -- when discussing environmental problems? Coming from the chief of a government that stakes its legitimacy on its ability to deliver economic prosperity, admitting that environmental concerns,

democratization, and human rights are part of the same equation makes for a surprising pronouncement indeed.

Yet for Indonesia's burgeoning community of non-governmental organizations (NGOs), Suharto's admission represented a vindication of their efforts to influence public policy in their country. Currently totaling over 8,000, many of Indonesia's NGOs have long been saying -- often at their own peril -- that needs Indonesia greater political participation in order to safeguard future development.

Leaders of environmental NGOs have been at the forefront of these calls for political liberalization in Indonesia. "The only way to be anti-Suharto is through the environmental movement," one NGO activist went so far as to say. "There is no other way to talk about Suharto or human rights." [2]

In the past, there has been little love lost between Indonesia's NGOs and Suharto's so-called "New Order" government, which traditionally disdains non-governmental involvement in political matters.

"They [NGOs] may claim to be supporters of campaigns to defend worker's rights or even protect the environment but later involve themselves in political activities," said one high-ranking government official earlier last year. "That," he intoned, "is not acceptable." [3]

Yet Indonesia's recent environmental and financial crises have made NGO criticism of governmental policies all the more powerful, if still not officially "acceptable." Moreover, growing domestic and international recognition of their political leverage indicates that future political change in Indonesia will undoubtedly directly involve the country's NGO community.

This essay explores the role Indonesia's NGOs, and its environmental NGOs in particular, currently play in Indonesian society as advocates for political reform. I will begin this essay with a survey of the history of political pluralism in Indonesia, and will discuss contemporary non-governmental organizations as being the last remnant of that tradition permitted under Suharto's all-encompassing rule. As background to the rise of Indonesia's environmental movement, I will then discuss the most pressing and the most publicized of Indonesia's environmental concerns. Focusing on several case studies involving Indonesian NGOs -- and in particular, the controversial Indonesian Forum for the Environment -- I will analyze the real impact NGO activities have had on political liberalization to date in New Order Indonesia.

Colonialism to "Guided Democracy": The Rise and Fall of Political Pluralism

Mass organization has played a central role in Indonesian society since well before the country's independence. What began as small self-help cooperatives in the nineteenth century among peasants, urban workers, indigenous petty traders, and intellectuals evolved into embryonic political movements that became vehicles for popular anti-Dutch sentiment. [4] Often directed

by a cadre of educated, charismatic indigenous leaders, the mushrooming of these anti-colonial mass organizations in the early twentieth century gave birth to the zaman bergerak, 'the era of movement,' in Indonesian history.

The zaman bergerak began largely with Islamic, nationalist groups like Sarekat Islam (Islamic Union) and the Mummadiyah (Followers of Muhammad).[5] Following on their heels was another wave of mostly nationalist mass-based associations and youth organizations. In 1927, a group of Dutch-educated nationalists led by a 26-year-old Sukarno established the Indonesian Nationalist Party (PNI). While often suppressed by the Dutch, these early mass organizations were given new life when the onset of WWII saw the passing of colonial control over Indonesia from the Netherlands' strict imperial rule to an unquestionably brutal, though in many ways more politically liberal Japanese occupation between 1942 and 1945.

During the Japanese occupation, many mass organizations coalesced into political parties, including various Islamic parties and the Indonesian Communist Party.[6] Along with Sukarno's PNI, these political organizations were instrumental in securing further liberalization from the Japanese colonial masters. Other mass organizations born at this time developed into labor unions, farmers and fishermen associations, youth and women alliances, or other types of NGOs.[7]

As Indonesia passed from partial to full independence under Sukarno, political pluralism reached dizzying heights. In 1945 Sukarno articulated the state ideology, Pancasila,[8] in an effort "to bind together the diverse groups of an extremely pluralistic society." [9] Nonetheless, extreme political pluralism in the new country resulted in what Benedict Anderson (1994) described as "a kind of permanent round-the-clock politics in which mass organizations competed with each other at every conceivable level without there being any real resolution." [10]

By 1950 some thirteen major parties were politically active, each representing a particular class, ethnicity, ideology, or Islamic group. Continuous disagreement and infighting among the various political factions virtually paralyzed Sukarno's government. Between 1950 and 1956, Sukarno was forced to dissolve and reform his cabinet six times. In Indonesia's 1955 elections -- considered the fairest ever in the history of the country -- Sukarno's PNI barely managed to hold on to power, garnering just 22.3 percent of the popular vote. With such a narrow mandate, Sukarno could not form a cohesive ruling coalition, and the government once again dissolved into chaos.[11]

Declaring the present arrangement unworkable, Sukarno effectively ended Indonesia's brief experiment with parliamentary democracy in 1956. Backed by both the PNI and the Communist Party, Sukarno dismissed the national assembly and voided the country's nine-year old constitution, proclaiming an era of "Guided Democracy." From 1956 until his overthrow by the military in the mid-1960s, Sukarno became increasingly left-leaning and authoritarian.

Student Activism and the Ascendancy of the New Order

Beginning in the early 1960s, student and intellectual activism became an increasingly important political force. Sukarno oversaw the establishment of the Communist Party-affiliated People's Cultural Institute, called Lekra, which sought to repress and harass intellectuals deemed to be less-than revolutionary.[12] The predominantly upper- and middle-class students and intellectuals strongly resented Lekra, and what began as dissatisfied grumblings with that organization snowballed into widespread student protest against Sukarno's undemocratic and corrupt rule as a whole. The student protests, in turn, became flashpoints for popular anti-Sukarno sentiment from many sectors of the population.

As the governing communist and leftist alliance crumbled in the mid-1960s, students "heightened the sense of crisis -- of an uncontrolled situation" with near-daily public protests against Sukarno's rule.[13] When the military came to power promising to reestablish order and eliminate corruption, students and intellectuals joined them in calling for the "simplification" and reduction of political parties for the sake of social stability. Seeking to establish a dual-party democratic system, these activists garnered substantial public support for the new military government and their proclaimed New Order under the slogan "politics no, development yes" in a campaign to replace "ideological factionalism with the development programme." [14]

Yet while sharing the frustrations of students and intellectuals with the political instability and economic stagnation that characterized Sukarno's rule, "Suharto came to power determined to restrict the political process to a small elite in the belief that less politics was a necessary precondition for a prolonged period of economic development." [15]

Soon after taking power, Suharto's party, Golkar, introduced the "floating mass" concept of political participation whereby the populace would be "allowed to vote once every five years but otherwise refrain from political activity." [16] The nine remaining political parties, excluding Golkar, were "encouraged" to dissolve and reform as two new parties: the United Development Party and the Indonesian Democratic Party. Even when elections were held, the results were obviously manipulated by the central party. If the military had not interfered with the election, said one General Soemitro, "the Muslim parties would have won. I can assure you that!" [17]

This kind of "democracy" was well suited to Suharto's vision of political organization. After all, he reasoned, "with one and only one road already mapped out, why should we then have nine different cars? The General Elections must serve the very purpose for which they are held, that is, to create political stability. Only these kinds of elections are of value to us." [18]

While accommodating student activists in the early years of his rule -- even going so far as to allocate several parliamentary seats to student leaders until the early 1970s [19] -- Suharto gradually began depoliticizing Indonesia's campuses as part of an overall effort to curtail political pluralism.

Student and intellectual support for Suharto came to an abrupt end in January 1974, when demonstrations against the high levels of Japanese economic influence in Indonesia resulted in the arrest of student leaders and the banning of several liberal newspapers. [20] The ability of

students to organize en masse was gradually eroded until Suharto imposed the Campus Normalization Act of 1978 which effectively ended the possibility of student activism.[21] Further protests were met with violence, and the government abolished the dewan mahasiswa -- university-wide student councils -- that had previously provided the framework for student political activities.[22]

Owing to their former partnership, however, student groups were among the last of the mass organizations to suffer from Suharto's deep antipathy towards political pluralism. Indeed, the ascendancy of the New Order government witnessed "the steady weakening of political parties and other society-based forces, such as pressure groups, social classes, [and] voluntary organizations such as NGOs."

Suharto's government established the principle of *perwadhakan tunggal*, meaning "the only, rightful place," by which most non-governmental associations, unions or other popular movements were forced to place themselves under government-sponsored umbrella organizations.[23] Political pluralism and rights of free association were made subject to increasingly harsh restrictions as the New Order government solidified its power base, while those who continued to openly challenge Suharto's rule were co-opted by the regime or eliminated.[24]

The Transformation of the NGO in the New Order

Although forcefully insistent on the right of his government to silence political protest or pluralism, Suharto has never sought the destruction of Indonesian civil society altogether. Rather, recognizing the need for controllable structures that can accommodate Indonesia's tradition of civic involvement, the New Order government has allowed new kinds of depoliticized NGOs to become "a legitimate channel for social and political participation which has otherwise been blocked by the government." [25]

At the same time, however, Jakarta has closely monitored and moved quickly to restrict any activities by NGOs that may constitute a political challenge to the authority of Suharto's regime. New Order authorities guard their government's legitimacy so jealously that the "non-governmental" phrase in the term "NGO" has been deemed to come uncomfortably close to connoting "anti-government." [26] In order to avoid harassment and intimidation, Indonesian NGOs are obliged to use the term *lembaga pengembangan swadaya masyarakat* (LPSM), meaning "self-reliant community development institution." [27] Smaller NGOs often call themselves simply "self-reliant community institution" and use the Indonesian acronym LSM. Although the term NGO is still used owing to its wide international currency, all non-governmental organizations in the New Order are careful to stress their "community" and "development"-oriented outlooks. [28]

The central government has typically sought to channel NGOs towards its stated goals of economic development, relying on them to render services and expertise to Indonesians that the central government is unwilling or unable to provide. Voluntary organizations aimed at

promoting community self-reliance through work in such fields as local development, education, cooperative housing, and local agricultural projects -- in short, anything deemed sufficiently "apolitical" by Suharto -- have actually been encouraged by the New Order government.[29]

Keeping carefully within the guidelines of *perwadhakan tunggal*, these types of NGOs are unsurprisingly marked by a high level of cooperation with the state.[30] Their work is generally on the local level and is grassroots-oriented. Frequently working in conjunction with government officials or programs, these LPSMs have been so effective that a number of them have achieved region- or nation-wide recognition.

One such group is the Nuclear Smallholders' Scheme (NSS) based in West Sumatra. Begun in the early years of the New Order government, this LPSM helps small farmers pool management expertise and, in cooperation with the West Sumatra Development Bank, assists them in securing and managing loans. A related LSM started by NSS is the Yayasan Suluh Desa, which now operates schools, community workshops, and small shops as well as health, livestock, and fishpond programs.[31]

Another LPSM with close governmental ties (its director was made head of the government-affiliated farmer's organization) is Bina Swadaya, an organization that also works in agricultural development and with community savings groups. Begun in 1957, Bina Swadaya has grown to a national organization in the New Order, holding training workshops for government officials and village heads alike on the implementation and management of community development programs.[32]

In the early 1970s, NGOs with markedly different attitudes towards cooperation with and co-optation by the state began to emerge. While also coordinating a number of activities ostensibly aimed at "community development" or simply "development," these groups have sought to influence government policy at the highest levels through grassroots organizing and, more recently, through limited media campaigns in both the local and international press. It is the efforts of these organizations to achieve a measure of participation in the political decision-making process that "constitute the first signs of societal pluralism in Indonesia's authoritarian political order" since Suharto's rise to power.[33]

It is no coincidence that increasing numbers of activist NGOs came into existence as Suharto tightened his grip on campus protests. Prohibited from other forms of political involvement, many of these newer NGOs were established by intellectuals and former student activists themselves.[34]

The Institute for Economic and Social Research, Education and Information (LP3ES) is one such group. Espousing moderate Islamic values, LP3ES maintains small industrial projects, household economy programs and various other educational programs in *pesantren*[35] throughout the country in an attempt to foster autonomous, regional development in a manner that is "more culturally indigenous and less socially alienating" than the government's

development efforts.[36] LP3ES also publishes Prisma, one of Indonesia's leading journals of social affairs.

One of the most radical NGOs to emerge under the New Order is the Indonesia Legal Aid Foundation -- Yayasan Lembaga Bantuan Hukum Indonesia (LBHI). Through its work, LBHI seeks to make public its efforts to improve the rule of law in Indonesia.[37] Arguing that "equality before the law will remain an impractical ideal unless gross imbalances in wealth and power are corrected," LBHI and its local affiliates provide legal representation and assistance to small labor associations (groups that, while under the aegis of the national labor union, are unable to obtain satisfactory representation), small businessmen, squatters, small landholders, and the like.[38] Historically affiliated with dissident politicians[39] and frequently taking on cases that are embarrassing to the regime, LBHI officials are frequently the targets of censure or harassment by Suharto's government, and have been forbidden to leave the country on several occasions.

The Environment and Development in Indonesia

By the time Suharto formally took over the reigns of government in 1968, Sukarno's disastrous economic legacy seemed an almost insurmountable problem. According to the World Bank, over sixty percent of Indonesians lived in poverty at the time. Inflation was over one thousand per cent per year, while the government was saddled with a massive budget deficit and a foreign deficit of US\$2 billion -- the yearly interest on which exceeded the country's total export revenue. Factories were operating at a fraction of capacity and with outdated equipment, and the country's infrastructure was in a shambles.[40] Once a major grain supplier to the region, Indonesia had become the largest purchaser of rice in the world by the end of Sukarno's regime. Sukarno's fiery rhetoric and closed door policies had also alienated foreign donor institutions and slowed foreign investment to a trickle.

Suharto came to power promising to change Indonesia's economic situation, and economic development became the *raison d'etre* for his government. Engaging a group of Berkeley-trained economists -- the technocrats, otherwise known as the "Berkeley mafia" -- to get the economy moving at all costs, Suharto flung open the nation's doors to foreign investment and funneled oil revenue into the construction of factories for the making of steel, paper, textiles and the like.

Suharto's development efforts also focused on the rapid exploitation of Indonesia's natural wealth in order to boost foreign revenue. While developing the national oil industry, the New Order government also moved to tap the forest resources of the countryside. Claiming sole jurisdiction over a staggering 74 percent of all land in Indonesia,[41] Jakarta began granting logging concessions to state-run and private companies over vast tracts of prime timber areas for next to nothing.[42] The 1967 Foreign Capital Investment Law encouraged multinational corporations to extract timber from the country's outer islands, granting them as well as domestic logging companies five year tax income holidays, which some companies have been able to extend to up to fifteen years.[43]

Massive timber extraction over the years made Indonesia one of the largest exporters of wood products in the world, and by the late 1980s, Indonesia accounted for more than 70 percent of the world trade in plywood.[44] Like any lucrative industry in the New Order economy, government interests have historically been closely involved in natural resource exploitation. In 1980, 24 of the 34 local companies engaged in the timber business involved high-ranking military personnel.[45]

The efficient exploitation of Indonesia's natural resources has contributed substantially to the steady growth rates that have characterized Suharto's rule. However, the Washington-based World Resources Institute estimates that, once the deleterious effects to the environment are accounted for (a factor ignored by traditional accounting methods), Indonesia's real growth from 1971 to 1984 has only been 4 percent annually, rather than the 7.1 percent suggested by traditional economic measures.[46] Although such statistics must be treated with some caution, it is clear that much of Indonesia's growth in the New Order has come at a steep price to the natural environment.

With 10 percent of the world's rain forests (second only to Brazil), Indonesia is losing as much as one million hectares of forest every year. The timber trade, commercial plantations of palm and rubber, and massive state-sponsored resettlement programs have also led to the large-scale clearing of land. Owing to the destruction of the country's rainforests, Indonesia currently has a longer list of endangered species than Brazil.[47]

The effects of deforestation are felt throughout the country. Following the clear-cutting of rainforest, the thin layer of tropical topsoil that anchors the forest's tremendous biodiversity quickly washes away, rendering the land unable to regenerate forest growth and making it useless for cultivation. As a result, the government has classified 8.6 million hectares of Indonesia as "critical land," defined as "land which is generally unable to fulfill any of the normal soil functions, including water absorption or the production of even a meager subsistence crop." [48] An additional 20 million hectares of land have been classified "non-arable" following deforestation, and another 12 million hectares are judged to have "serious erosion problems." These "erosion problems" are conservatively estimated by the government to lead to crop yields falling by 5 percent per year.[49] Environmentalists outside the country put the direct costs to the Indonesian economy at close to US\$1 billion per year.[50]

Indonesia's rapidly expanding industrial sector has begun to cause a number of environmental problems as well. Factories are usually built next to rivers so that industrial waste may be disposed of easily, often without prior treatment. Some twenty major rivers in Indonesia are classified by the government as having "acute" pollution problems. These include the Musi River in South Sumatra, where 14 ice factories pour untreated ammonia directly into the water; the Barito in South Kalimantan, where pulp and plywood factories have largely destroyed the local fishing industry; and the Cipinang near Jakarta, where the tens tons of chemical waste per day that are poured into the river have reportedly even reduced the local mosquito population, not to mention that of other animals in the area.[51] Coupled with the high number of rivers that suffer from siltation owing to upland deforestation, river pollution has adversely affected much of

Indonesia's rural population that relies solely on rivers for their water supply.

Industrial pollution has become relatively serious in some urban areas as well. Motor vehicle and factory emissions have resulted in dangerously high air pollution in a number of Java's major cities. In one factory area, a recent survey showed that 24 percent of the local population suffered from acute respiratory disease.[52] Unchecked industrialization has also been at the root of several catastrophic environmental accidents, such as the abrupt release of waste from a fertilizer plant in Aceh that polluted fish stock in ponds within a 500 hectare radius.[53]

The Rise of Environmental NGOs

Bowing to international pressure and acknowledging the real need for pollution control in its rush towards development, Indonesia's central government established the Ministry for Development Supervision and the Environment in 1978.[54] As originally conceived, the Ministry's sole purpose was to promote an efficient, economically and "environmentally sound development," defined as the "conscious and planned endeavor to utilize and manage resources wisely in sustainable development to improve the quality of life." [55]

Yet the former technocrat appointed to head the new ministry, Emil Salim, shocked both his employers and the international community with the vigor with which he pursued environmental causes under the aegis of "sustainable development." Serving as State Minister for the Environment from 1978 to 1993, Salim proved to be "a tireless advocate for the environment who [was] not afraid to criticize the environmental records of industry, forestry concessionaires, and mining companies, many of whom have close ties to the Suharto government." [56]

While Salim's championing of environmental causes led Western conservationists and development agencies to cite him as "the single ray of hope in an otherwise environmentally unenlightened government," [57] the close ties between the Suharto regime and the businesses criticized by Salim's ministry forced the minister to constantly walk what one analyst calls "a tightrope between taking action on the environment and holding onto his position within the government." [58]

Despite the high regard in which he was held by foreign environmentalists, Salim's controversial tenureship did not help the position of his ministry vis-a-vis the rest of the New Order government. Quickly realizing that Suharto intended the Ministry for the Environment to remain underfunded and, as one foreign official put it, "weak politically...lack[ing] the ability to enforce any of its legislation," Salim took the initiative to cultivate the support of NGOs to build a domestic constituency for sustainable development with considerable donor support. [59]

Indonesia's landmark Environmental Management Act of 1982, written mainly within the Ministry for the Environment, therefore deliberately called on NGOs to play a "participatory role" [60] in the development process and "recognized the right of NGOs to act as community institutions for environmental management and development." [61]

Encouraged by the Ministry for the Environment, the number of environmental NGOs mushroomed over the course of Salim's career. Where there were once virtually no environmentally-focused organizations, observers wrote that there were suddenly "hundreds springing up around the nation." [62]

In many respects, the rest of the Suharto government welcomed the skyrocketing number of international and domestic environmental NGOs in Indonesia. In fact, the government came to rely on the funds and expertise of many them. The World-Wide Fund for Nature (WWF), for example, now helps manage 17 out of Indonesia's 32 national parks. With an annual budget of US\$5 million and a large staff that includes 15 foreigners, the Switzerland-based organization maintains a close working relationship with the New Order government. [63]

Like many of their peer organizations in other fields, the bulk of the domestic environmental NGOs that sprouted up in the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s work with local governments and within small communities to provide necessary services while remaining well within the boundaries of *perwadhakan tunggal*. The Yogyakarta-based CD Bethesda, for example, received a national award in 1979 from President Suharto for tapping underground aquifers to provide drinking water to several of the surrounding communities. [64]

At the urging of the Ministry for the Environment, various local and regional NGOs played a key role in the government's Clean River Program (*Prokasih Kali Bersih*). Providing pollution monitors and community organizers that the government could scarce afford, environmental NGOs worked closely with government officials to significantly reduce the pollution loads of 24 of the country's most polluted rivers within two years. [65]

Unwilling or unable to help all of the myriad communities scattered throughout the Indonesian archipelago cope with the sometimes severe environmental impacts of rapid development, New Order officials offer cautious praise for the activities of many of these NGOs. "If we look at the total number of LSMs in Indonesia, they are quite promising in terms of becoming a national asset, in their efforts to improve the quality of life and the welfare of the people," said Djon Sani, head of the Sub-Directorate on Development and Guidance within the Office of Social and Political Affairs. "Nevertheless," Sani continued, "there are a few LSMs, just the minority...which have become involved in opposition activity." [66]

A disproportionate number of the NGOs Sani and his employers are worried about hail from the environmental sector. For "sustainable development," as conceived of by Suharto's government and as referred to in the Ministry for the Environment's original charter, has become quite a different thing in the hands of many of the NGOs under Salim's protective wing. Rather than simply connoting a means to soften the rougher edges of rapid development, most of the larger, Jakarta-based NGOs or networks of NGOs have adopted a broader definition of "sustainable development" whose main features include a concern for:

inter-generational equity; improving human welfare (i.e., poverty alleviation); distributional equity (i.e., economic growth with equity); balanced or sound resource use (i.e., sound resource management); maintaining the carrying capacity of the biological system by promoting environmental protection; and the "participation of all sectors of society in decision-making" [my emphasis].[67]

As one of the only (somewhat) acceptable forums where such ideas can be forwarded in New Order Indonesia, many environmental NGOs have begun to serve as focal points for political activism, particularly for students. As many environmental NGOs provide useful and inexpensive services to Indonesian communities, however, the New Order government has largely tolerated even some of the more radical aspects the environmental "movement" as being "a politically attractive way to channel student frustration." Student activism in support of environmental causes is therefore often "quite acceptable in Indonesia, whereas more direct protest against the government and its other policies is not." [68]

Encouraging NGOs to act as a sort of a proxy for his essentially toothless ministry, Emil Salim has thus managed to call greater attention to -- and attract outside funds for -- Indonesia's myriad environmental problems.

Indonesian Forum for the Environment (WALHI): A Legal Challenge to the New Order

One of the most outspoken environmental NGOs to emerge since the establishment of the Ministry for the Environment is the Indonesian Forum for the Environment, known by its Indonesian acronym WALHI (Wahana Lingkungan Hidup Indonesia). Founded in 1980, WALHI is a Jakarta-based network of local and regional NGOs located throughout the Indonesian archipelago.

As the environmental movement in Indonesia has grown, so has WALHI's numbers and its political voice. Since its inception, WALHI has grown from a loose grouping of a couple dozen environmental NGOs to a network of over three hundred members.[69] In addition to providing a forum for its constituent organizations, the central office in Jakarta become a vocal critic of national environmental policies in its own right.

In the name of "sustainable development," WALHI has frequently pressed the New Order government for greater political pluralism. Openly disagreeing with Jakarta on issues ranging from endangered species management to indigenous peoples' rights to the granting of logging concessions over "public" land, WALHI publicly calls for a "development process in which the people of Indonesia have a decisive voice in the formulation of policy about resource use in their areas." [70]

Unlike the Indonesian Legal Aid Foundation (LBHI), WALHI can count on its environmental focus to lend its political efforts greater legitimacy. As WALHI's first executive director, Erna Witoelar, said in 1983: "There is no lack of sincere and broad-minded government officials, and it is only beneficial to the environmental movement that we join forces with them to fight the

same war, even in different battles and using different tactics." [71]

WALHI's most dramatic challenge to Suharto's development policies came in December 1988, when the organization led a suit against PT Inti Indorayon Utama Ltd., a pulp and rayon factory based in northern Sumatra and backed by Suharto's eldest son, along with several government ministries for compensation for damages caused by the factory's unchecked pollution and deforestation of the surrounding area.

In complete disregard for the detailed environmental stipulations inserted by the Ministry for the Environment into its government-issued operating contract, Indorayon had been dumping chemical wastes directly into the nearby Asahan River and rapidly depleting local forest stocks for its pulp mill. At one point a poorly-maintained chlorine tank located next to the river exploded. Wearing gas masks, Indorayon officials went from village to village in the area assuring people that all was safe. [72] Although concerns for Indorayon's cavalier behavior towards the environment were raised by the Ministry for the Environment, the company's powerful supporters -- which went all the way up to the President's office -- swept them aside.

With fish dying in the Asahan River and local people complaining of skin irritation, WAHLI, together with legal assistance from LBHI, filed suit against both Indorayon and the government, claiming that negligence by the latter, in failing to enforce its own environmental regulations, was responsible for much of the damage.

The suit, which has come to be regarded as a "milestone in the history of environmental advocacy in Indonesia," [73] drew extensive media attention both domestically and internationally and by many accounts became a tremendous embarrassment to Suharto personally. [74] The case was a radical step indeed; never before had any non-government organization challenged the authority and the effectiveness of the New Order so directly.

Not surprisingly, WAHLI lost the suit in short order. But the moral victory belonged to the environmentalists. Even in allowing the suit to proceed, the Indonesian courts had acknowledged for the first time that an agency could represent the environment, or a community, that was not the central government itself. In the words of a WAHLI official, the case "laid the groundwork for future victories for the environment and the Indonesian people." [75]

NGOs and Social Control in the New Order

Buoyed by such victories, environmental NGOs became increasingly critical of government policies throughout the 1980s and '90s. Under the rubric of "sustainable development," many environmental NGOs have also expanded the scope of their advocacy work to include calling for government aid in alleviating poverty alleviation and working for labor rights.

Yet NGOs also have been repeatedly cautioned to lower their profile. As even Emil Salim said:

As long as the differences [between NGOs and the state] concerns problems of implementation, then the NGOs' right to exist is guaranteed. But if the differences concern more 'philosophical' differences in ideology or differences in national aims, then clearly any NGO with those sorts of differences with the government will not have the right to exist.[76]

The contradictory situation this requirement placed on many of the more progressive NGOs in Indonesia was summed up by Abdul Hakim, chairman of LBHI:

We are not in any sense a political party. We are not seeking to change the government. But it is also wrong to say NGOs cannot play politics. Their main activity is to influence policy -- which means playing politics.[77]

In reality, 'playing politics' in order to influence policy has led many Indonesian NGO activists, particularly those in the environmental field, to begin lobbying outright for a change of government. Their growing demands have taken subtle and not-so-subtle forms.

At a national-level seminar on "Motivating Private Sector and NGOs' Participation in Environmentally Sound and Sustainable Development," sponsored by Emil Salim's Ministry of Population and Environment in September 1990, NGO activists allegedly "hijacked the agenda," contending that democracy was essential to achieving sustainable development in Indonesia. In a move widely reported in the Indonesian press, Adi Sasono, a leading NGO activist, argued that as Indonesia's ruling elite did not have the "vision and effective political commitment" to environmentally sound and sustainable development, "the key issue to sustainable development is how to create a political system in which the public would assume the role of social control." Sasono concluded that "democracy is needed within the framework of promoting people's participation, as development is not only a state project." [78]

Such radical statements from the NGO community have motivated the authorities in Jakarta to constantly adopt new practices in place of the old policy of *perwadhakan tunggal* to further restrict the ability of NGOs to critique the government.

In 1985, for example, the New Order government introduced the Mass Organizations (ORMAS) Legislation with the purpose of limiting the scope for independent action of NGOs. ORMAS Legislation made it impossible for new NGOs to be established without special government permission, and it reestablished the right of the central government to revoke the licenses of existing NGOs at will. The legislation also made it more difficult for Indonesian NGOs to receive foreign assistance.[79]

On the introduction of the ORMAS legislation, Mohammed Natsir, a former Prime Minister of Indonesia (1950-1951), declared that "the rearrangement which occurred in the New Order in the field of political power . . . has resulted in paralysis and increasing narrowness of room for maneuver by non-governmental social and political organizations. This is being done step by step, systematically and unyieldingly." [80]

Again in 1994, in the wake of a series of crackdowns on the domestic press and national labor leaders, Suharto issued a presidential decree that further jeopardized NGOs' standing in New Order society. In the interests of national development, stated the decree, any organization would be shut down if it was found to be "undermining the authority [of the state] and/or discrediting the government...hindering the implementation of national development" or engaged in "other activity that upsets political stability and security." In addition, personal biographies of all NGO leaders were required to be submitted to the central government.[81]

Indonesian NGOs have thus had to increasingly operate in what they call "a 'climate of terror' -- a pervasive feeling that someone is always watching and ready to punish them if they behave 'irresponsibly.'"[82] This danger has also prompted many NGOs to seek other, more effective ways to influence their government.

Access to Political Power for NGOs: The Media and INGI

With their activities increasingly restricted by the government, NGO activists sometimes complain that the only reason their existence is tolerated at all is because it serves to further legitimize the New Order regime.

"We give some appearance of democracy in Indonesia, some appearance of freedom of speech, but our base is very narrow, and our power to disrupt the economy is very small," said George Aditjondro, a lecturer at Satya Wacana Christian University and a member of the Joint Committee for the Defense of the East Timorese. In Indonesia, he continued, "if you do not have economic power, then your political powers are more symbolic than real." For Indonesian NGOs, Aditjondro concluded, "political clout does not depend on their membership but more on their voice in the media." [83]

Indeed, it is Indonesian NGOs' ability to manipulate the media -- and particularly the international media -- that has led to some of their most notable domestic successes.

In early 1989, mere months after WAHLI had filed suit against the government and Indorayon, Jakarta announced the biggest foreign investment project in the nation's history. In a US\$654 million deal, the US firm Scott Paper proposed to build and operate a 550,000 hectare eucalyptus plantation and pulp mill in the rainforests of Irian Jaya in a joint venture with the Indonesian company P.T. Astra International. Although the Scott-Astra project threatened to displace some 15,000 indigenous people, the estimated 6,000 jobs and US\$200 million in annual revenue that the venture promised to generate prompted a rapid endorsement by the central government.[84]

A coalition of Indonesian NGOs quickly formed to oppose the project on environmental and ethical grounds. With the NGO Network for Forest Conservation in Indonesia (SKEPHI) acting as the overall coordinating agency and WAHLI representing various environmental NGOs operating on the local and provincial levels, the coalition managed to enlist the aid of two

international environmental NGOs: the Rainforest Action Network and Survival International. [85]

The coalition embarked on an extensive media campaign designed to embarrass Scott Paper. The Rainforest Action Network sponsored an advertisement in the New York Times calling attention to rainforest destruction in Indonesia and the proposed Scott-Astra project, while the coalition began mobilizing an international consumer boycott of Scott Paper.[86] The campaign worked, and quickly; owing in large part to NGO pressure, Scott Paper pulled out of the project in October 1989.[87]

The impact of Indonesian environmental NGOs' use of the international media proved to be effective enough for the government to respond in kind. In 1990, the government-sponsored Indonesian Wood Panel Association (APKINDO) took out several million dollars' worth of advertisements in newspapers around the country in an effort to rebut international complaints that the country's tropical forests were being destroyed by uncontrolled logging. WALHI issued a stinging criticism of the ad campaign, which was reported even more widely by the international media, countering that the advertising budget would have been better spent disciplining loggers. [88]

The New Order regime has also gone so far as to form environmental groups of its own -- so-called GONGOs (government-organized NGOs) -- whose primary purpose is to launch counter-public relations campaigns.[89] The Environmental Management and Information Center (PIPLI), for example, was established by the Indonesian Chamber of Commerce to supposedly monitor industrial waste water treatment. While it appears to do little in the way of monitoring, it annually presents awards to forty-five firms it considers most "environmental friendly," an event that is given wide press exposure in Indonesia.[90]

As demonstrated by the Scott-Astra case, domestic environmental NGOs' cooperation with international NGOs can have a direct economic impact. Indonesian environmental NGOs have also been somewhat successful in influencing the US\$4.7 billion in foreign development aid that Indonesia receives annually from the member states and multilateral organizations that comprise the Inter-Governmental Group on Indonesia (IGGI).[91]

In 1985, a group of western, Asian and Indonesian environmental NGOs formed the International NGO Forum on Indonesia (INGI). Designed to "strengthen people's participation in development" and to "direct its advocacy to the IGGI conference,"[92] the INGI meets annually prior to the IGGI meeting to formulate recommendations and criticisms for current development aid.

Much to the chagrin of the Suharto government, the INGI appears to have directly affected the decisions of the IGGI on more than one occasion. In 1988 the INGI, at the prompting of several Indonesian NGOs, sent a letter of concern to the World Bank regarding the Bank's funding for the US\$283 million Kedung Ombo dam project.[93] In the letter, the INGI expressed concern over the Indonesian government's treatment of the nearly 7,000 people who had refused to

resettle without adequate compensation. Some of these families, according to the INGI, had been "physically beaten up and their identity cards marked ex-Tapol, branding them as ex-communist political prisoners" by government soldiers.[94] To Jakarta's horror, the World Bank responded to the INGI's concerns by sending a special mission to Indonesia to re-evaluate the entire project.[95]

Environmental NGOs' meddling with the IGGI donor forum was strongly disapproved of by the central government. Following the Kedung Ombo incident, then-Home Affairs Minister Rudini summoned the heads of the country's environmental NGOs and berated them for being "unpatriotic" by "speaking ill of their country overseas." [96] State Secretary (General) Moerdiono, Suharto's principle spokesman, pointedly stated that "environmental problems must not be abused for political ends." [97]

The following year, the government threatened to withhold exit permits for the NGO officials who were planning to attend the Seventh Annual INGI Meeting in Washington, DC. Wielding the blacklist that threatened to effectively silence environmental NGO participation in one of its most important forums, Rudini was able to extract an agreement from the NGO leaders that this time they would behave properly while abroad. Jakarta was satisfied that it had made its point; the permits were granted. [98]

The Impact of Environmental NGOs on Policy Making

Through their often controversial techniques, environmental NGOs in Indonesia have scored some important victories that have clearly led the central government to change some of its ways with regards to the environment. Seeking to reduce environmental NGOs' role in exposing pollution cases, Jakarta announced in June 1990 its decision to establish an Environmental Control Agency (Bapedal) that would aggressively enforce its industrial pollution regulations. By mid-November 1990, 738 companies in East Java alone were cited for various pollution violations.

When asked what had prompted such decisive action from a government so long accustomed to giving industry free reign concerning environmental issues, Assistant Minister for the Environment Nabel Makarim admitted that: "Increasing NGO pressure and a new regulation empowering the public to sue the government for mismanagement and breaking its laws make it imperative that the Environmental Control Agency Bapedal move rapidly and carefully." [99]

The following year, the government made clear its intention to take a more pro-active role in the environmental arena as President Suharto declared 1993 "the Year of the Environment." Even more recently, the government has adopted a Business Performance Rating system that gives companies a gold, green, blue, red, or black label depending on their efforts to protect the environment. Though the system has little ability to punish companies rated less than "green," the results are publicized in the media. The rationale, according to Business Asia, "is that the humiliation of a bad environmental rating will have more effect than a lawsuit." [100]

Yet such efforts to co-opt the themes and strategies of the environmental movement, while somewhat beneficial to environmental causes, have not silenced NGO efforts to press for greater political liberalization from the Suharto regime. In this regard, it cannot be said that the NGO sector has been particularly successful. If anything, Suharto has tightened his grip on political control in response to their demands.

Yet greater attention must be paid to the NGO sector if Indonesia is truly to find its way towards something resembling "sustainable development." Indeed, the most powerful players in the New Order government continue to be closely tied to the activities that harm the environment the most.

Months before last summer's devastating forest fires, Indonesia's current environment minister, Sarwono Kusumaatmadja, tried to warn his colleagues in the government of the impending danger. In addition to contravening land-clearing legislation that had been enacted in 1995, he said, state-sponsored timber, palm oil and lumber plantations were courting disaster by continuing to set fire to their land in order to prepare it for planting. Yet his pleas fell on deaf ears. "When we announced three plantation companies that had set fires, the agriculture ministry challenged us," Sarwono said. "They have a conflict of interest." [101]

Although a watchdog outside the government was clearly needed, the environmental NGO community was forced to keep silent at the time by a renewed examination of their status by the authorities. While the Ministry for the Environment found no allies in the government, Justice Minister Oetoyo Oesman declared that a number of environmental NGOs who tried to voice their concerns were guilty of violating the state Pancasila ideology. The appropriate response, he said, was to disband them. "We need to anticipate NGO activities as they can damage the nation's image abroad," he told reporters. [102]

Yet while the core New Order actors continue to deeply distrust environmental NGOs, there is also increasing evidence that in the wake of last summer's fires, many in Jakarta have come to acknowledge that the role played by NGOs in national politics could ultimately be a healthy one.

"The government should treat NGOs as partners in national development, particularly in raising people's participation in the process of democratization," said New Order official Rudini as the arrival of the season's long-delayed rains finally began to quench the worst of the fires. "Developing nations need a system of checks and balances." [103] In Indonesia, where political pluralism has traditionally provided the check against misrule, the inclusion of NGOs in policy development is clearly still much needed.

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8 Meaning 'the five principles': 1) Belief in one supreme God; 2) justice and civility among peoples; 3) the unity of Indonesia; 4) democracy through deliberation and consensus among representatives; and 5) social justice for all.

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21 Corrothers and Surtyatna, 124.

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28 Eldridge, 37.

29 Corrothers and Surtyatna, 122.

30 Eldridge, 41.

31 Eldridge, 44.

32 Corrothers and Surtyatna, 1995, 122-3.

33 James F. Riker, "Linking Development From Below to the International Environmental Movement: Sustainable Development and State-NGO Relations in Indonesia," *Journal of Business Administration* (January 1994), 160.

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35 Islamic boarding schools that educate a wide range of ages and are usually located in rural areas.

36 Eldridge, 48.

37 In a 1980 interview regarding the government's unlawful harassment of dissidents, Admiral Sudomo, head of Indonesia's internal security agency from 1978 to 1983, clearly illustrated how far groups like LBHI have to go towards improving the rule of law in Indonesia:

Where is the law that regulates prohibitions like that?

Sudomo: We can just do it...It's true, there's no written prohibition. But that's not a problem.

Why not just write it, it's a government decision, isn't it?

Sudomo: The government can adopt a policy like that if it wants. The policy can be written or not. That's the right of the government.

That way, they [the dissidents] can't take legal action against the policy, can they?

Sudomo: This is a political matter, isn't it?

So, the only way to settle this problem, they have to ask for forgiveness, like that?

Sudomo: Yes, ask for forgiveness.

Quoted in Schwarz, 245.

38 Eldridge, 50.

39 Most notably the "group of fifty," prominent dissidents (discussed by Admiral Sudomo above) who openly questioned Soeharto's use of the military as the political muscle behind his rule.

40 Schwarz, 52.

41 Potter, 15.

42 "Southeast Asian Smog is Tied to Politics," *Wall Street Journal* (September 30, 1997), A17.

43 Dauvergne, 513.

44 Dauvergne, 513.

45 J. Bresnan, *Managing Indonesia: The Modern Political Economy*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1993, 212. Also Potter, 11-2.

46 Schwarz, 59.

47 Dauvergne, 497; Riker, 161.

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50 Riker, 161.

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68 MacAndrews, 376.

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73 A. Purnomo, "Policy Influence for Sustainable Development: Case Studies from the Environmental Movement in Indonesia", MA Thesis, Tufts University, 1994, quoted in Potter, 20.

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79 MacIntyre, 39.

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82 Potter, 31.

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86 Riker, 168.

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89 Riker, 174.

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- 99 Riker, 175.
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